



## Leaving Images in the Minds of Readers: Ralph Fletcher on the Poet's Craft

by Terrell A. Young and Nancy L. Hadaway

**T**he oldest of nine children, poet Ralph Fletcher was raised in Marshfield, Massachusetts. As a young boy, he was immersed in stories and quickly became an avid reader. Becoming a writer took longer to develop. In his book *Reflections* (2007), he explains that in school he associated writing with handwriting, which was not a very positive experience. Later his mother encouraged him to write something to cure his boredom, which was a turning point in his life as a writer—it was the first time he wrote for himself and the first time that he enjoyed writing. Fletcher noted, “Writing at home was fun because no teacher was around to tell me what to write, grade it, or correct my handwriting” (2007, p. 15).

He is a prolific author who writes poetry, picture books, and novels for children and young adults as well as books about writing for children and professional books for teachers. Teachers find his books for children are great for reading aloud for pleasure or for teaching writing traits. His professional book, *What Writers Need*, often sits beside Donald Graves’ classic *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work* (1983, Heinemann) as two of teachers’ most reliable resources for teaching writing to their students.

Fletcher lives in Lee, New Hampshire with his wife Joanne Portalupi. Together they have four sons. He and Joanne often collaborate on writing professional books for teachers and in staff development activities.

Our interview provides a glimpse into his writing, and his passion for poetry and kids. He also shares some tips that teachers will find useful for sharing poetry with their own students.

You write poetry and fiction for children and young adults in addition to professional books for

teachers. How do you juggle writing for such varied audiences?

Writing for various audiences brings a welcome texture or variety to my writing life. Think about Raffi, the children’s musician, poor guy, having to play *Baby Beluga* (or some variation) over and over. I don’t look down on him (not at all!) but I would feel confined to create a steady diet of such music. In a similar way, I don’t want to do the same old thing in my writing. Each audience brings new challenges, but also new opportunities.

Can you remember when and how you fell in love with poetry?

In my book *Poetry Matters: Writing a Poem from the Inside Out*, I talk about my brother’s tragic death when I was 21. Around that time I read and wrote a ton of poetry. I think poetry appealed to me because it’s so short and intense. It provided some balm for my soul during that difficult time.

What recommendations do you have for teachers to help their students better enjoy poetry?

That’s a biggie! As you well know, there have been many useful books written on that subject. You want students to get up close and personal with poetry they read. Here are two thoughts. First, give them photocopies of poems and invite them to mark them up. Kids might mark favorite lines, a place where they really connect, places where the poem starts to change, a word or image they really admire, and a part that confuses them.

Also, I’ve had good luck having students make their own anthologies of published poems. In order to do this, you have to show kids various kinds of anthologies, themed and unthemed. Students are asked to select a certain number of poems—say 10 to 15. They then create the title for

### A Sampler of Books by Ralph Fletcher

#### Children’s picture books

Fletcher, R. (2003). *Hello, harvest moon*. Illus. by K. Kiesler. New York: Clarion.  
Fletcher, R. (2008). *The sandman*. Illus. by R. Cowdrey. New York: Henry Holt.

#### Poetry books

Fletcher, R. (2005). *A writing kind of day*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.  
Fletcher, R. (2006). *Moving day*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.

#### Memoir

Fletcher, R. (2005). *Marshfield dreams: When I was a kid*. New York: Henry Holt.

#### Novel for Children

Fletcher, R. (2009). *Spider boy*. New York: Sand Piper.

#### Novels for Young Adults

Fletcher, R. (2007). *One o’clock chop*. New York: Henry Holt.  
Fletcher, R. (2011). *Also known as Rohan Pahi*. New York: Clarion.

#### Professional educator books

Fletcher, R. (2010). *Pyrotechnics on the page*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.  
Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (2011). *Introduce the qualities of writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.  
Fletcher, R. (2011). *Mentor author, mentor texts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

#### Books on writing for children

Fletcher, R. (2007). *How to write your life story*. New York: HarperCollins.  
Fletcher, R. (2007). *Reflections: Author at work*. Katohna, NY: Richard C. Owens.  
Fletcher, R. (2012). *Guy-write: What every guy writer needs to know*. New York: Henry Holt.

the anthology as well as write a brief introduction. My experience is that kids get very connected to "their" poems. One boy, Nate, named his anthology *Noems*. In his introduction he wrote: "To create the title of my anthology I combined the word Poems with my name (Nate) because these poems just changed my life..."

*Do you have any suggestions for helping students write poetry?*

Here are a few things I'd keep in mind. First, let kids experiment. The great thing about writing a poem is that, if it doesn't work, you can write another one tomorrow, and another the next. Second, I think it's important to emphasize non-rhyming poetry. Show them plenty of examples. Finally, write with your kids. Let them see you rolling up your sleeves and learning about poetry with them. They'll respect and respond to that.

*How important do you consider illustrations in poetry for young people? What do you consider the primary function of the illustrations?*

When I write a poem I want to leave an image in the mind of the reader. I don't want an illustration that is so striking and detailed that it will rob the reader of that image. I think an illustration to a poem might suggest an image or feeling, but leave plenty of room for the reader to make that image.

*What books of current children's poetry would you recommend that teachers consider for their classrooms? Why?*

Here are a few: *All the Small Poems* by Valerie Worth (1996, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux); she can evoke poetry from the simplest things. I love Kristine George's collections such as *Hummingbird Nest* (2004, Harcourt). She is consistently good. Paul Janeczko's collections are great, especially *The Place My Words Are Looking For* (1990, Simon & Schuster) which may be out of print. Joanne Ryder's natural poems are terrific, especially *My Father's Hands* (1994, HarperCollins).

*What do you want readers to take away from one of your collections of poetry?*

It's not a direct thing—what I want them to take away. At the risk of sounding pretentious I think each of my poems is a mini-celebration of language, and want the reader to share that celebration with me. Two of my best poetry collections are out of print, alas. *Ordinary Things: Poems From a Walk in Early Spring* is a great way to show kids how poetry is everywhere. When Shelley Harwayne read this book she remarked, "I think of these as steppingstone poems. Kids will read them and say: 'Oh, yeah, I see what he's doing, and I want to do that myself.'" That kind of poetry is valuable, I think. (The other out of print book is *I Have Wings*.)

*How often do you write poetry?*

I go through phases. Lately I've been writing a lot of fiction, which is time-consuming. But, like a faithful companion, poetry is always waiting for me right outside the door.

*What is coming next in the way of Ralph Fletcher publications?*

I don't have any poetry collections in press right now. My next book is *Guy-Write: What Every Guy Should Know about Writing* (Henry Holt, July, 2012). I have just completed the second edition of *What a Writer Needs* (Heinemann, early 2013).



*Is there a question that you wish we would have asked but did not?*

There are so many great quotes about poetry. One of my favorites is Charles Simic who said: "Poems are other people's snapshots in which we see our own lives."

For a list of professional books on teaching poetry, visit *Reading Today Online* at [www.reading.org/fletcher](http://www.reading.org/fletcher).

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## Outstanding Recent Poetry Publications for Children

- Coombs, K. (2012). *Water sings blue: Ocean poems*. Ill. by M. So. San Francisco: Chronicle
- Davies, N. (2012). *Outside your window: A first book of nature*. Ill. by M. Hearld. Watertown, MA: Candlewick.
- Elliott, D. (2012). *In the sea*. Ill. by H. Meade. Watertown, MA: Candlewick.
- Florian, D. (2012). *Poem runs: Baseball poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Florian, D. (2012). *UnBEElievables: Honeybee poems and paintings*. New York: Beach Lane.
- Harrison, D. L. (2012). *Cowboys*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Hopkins, L. B. (2012). *Nasty bugs*. Ill. by W. Terry. New York: Dial.
- Heard, G. (2012). *The arrow finds its mark: A book of found poems*. Ill. by A. Guillope. New York: Roaring Brook.
- Jensen, D. (2012). *A meal of stars: Poems up and down*. Ill. by T. Tusa. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Levine, G. C. (2012). *Forgive me, I meant to do it: False apology poems*. Ill. by M. Cordell. New York: Harper.
- Lewis, J. P. (2012). *Edgar Allan Poe's math pie: Math puzzlers in classic poems*. Ill. by M. Slack. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Lewis, J. P. & Yolen, J. (2012). *Take two! Poems about twins*. Ill. by S. Blackall. Watertown, MA: Candlewick.
- Salas, L.P. (2011). *Bookspeak!: Poems about books*. Ill. by J. Bisailon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Singer, M. (2012). *A stick is an excellent thing: Poems celebrating outdoor play*. Ill. by L. Pham. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Zimmer, T. V. (2011). *Cousins of clouds: Elephant poems*. Ill. by S. Addy & M. Halsey. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.